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ABSTRACT

This report presents the results of a delphi study used to determine the criteria for defining excellence in higher education. An open questionnaire was administered to the commissions on education of the Puerto Rico Legislature, the administrators and governing boards of the major public and private postsecondary institutions in Puerto Rico, and prominent figures of the academia, a total of 181 subjects. The results showed that respondents were likely to mention students' academic achievement as an important excellence criteria. In regard to academic programs and curriculum, respondents were likely to mention pertinence and comprehensiveness as excellence criteria. The academic preparation of the faculty and their mastery of instructional techniques were also considered essential criteria, as well as the sufficiency and adequacy of institutional resources. A deep concern for and commitment to the community was the excellence criterion most frequently mentioned by respondents in regard to the external environment. Contains 23 references. (GLR)

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EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION AS DEFINED BY LEGISLATORS AND PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS ADMINISTRATORS

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This paper was presented at the Thirty-First Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at The Westin St. Francis, San Francisco, California, May 26-29, 1991. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Jean Endo
Chair and Editor
Forum Publications Editorial
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ABSTRACT

Educators believe that the criteria to define excellence depend on the particular time period and the nature of the institutions. As higher education institutions are subject to constant renewal processes, it is essential to know the opinions of those who design policy regarding these criteria. A delphi methodology was used to identify criteria. An open questionnaire was administered to the commissions on education of the Puerto Rico Legislature and to the administrators and governing boards of the major public and private postsecondary institutions in Puerto Rico. Prominent figures of the academia were also surveyed.

The findings of the first phase of this study show that, in general terms and when referring to students, respondents were likely to mention students' academic achievement as an important excellence criteria. It was also underlined that institutions must develop a general culture knowledge and prepare students for employment. In regard to academic programs and curriculum, respondents were likely to mention pertinence and comprehensiveness as excellence criteria. The academic preparation of the faculty and their mastering of instructional techniques were considered essential criteria. Sufficiency and adequacy were the indicators of excellence stated by respondents when referring to institutional resources in general. A deep concern for and commitment to the community was the excellence criteria most frequently mentioned by respondents in regard to external environment. It seems that respondents considered both traditional and value-added approaches to excellence.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of excellence in postsecondary education has generated discussion in various forums. Educators consider that the criteria to define excellence depend on the nature of the institutions and on the particular time period. As stated by Skinner and Tofel (1986), although there is ample scholarly research on the general topic of excellence, "there is limited agreement about the criteria of excellence or how to determine them" (p. 94). Since postsecondary education is in a constant process of reevaluation and reform, it is essential

to know the opinion of legislators and educators who design policy regarding such criteria.

During the last fifteen years, postsecondary education in Puerto Rico has experienced an overwhelming growth and it is now under a deep reform process. As reflected by official statistics for the year 1989, 84 percent of the total enrollment is handled by five major institutions: University of Puerto Rico, Inter American University, Ana G. Méndez Educational Foundation, Catholic University, and The Sacred Heart University. The first one is a public institution and the four others are private. These institutions are accredited by the Puerto Rico Council of Higher Education (CHE) and by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA). Pursuant to Crespo (1985), competition among these institutions gears primarily around the institutional image, which gives "special attention" to the academic excellence of the programs, faculty preparation, study environment and physical facilities, among others. Even though José R. González, president of Inter American University, recently stated that excellence is the foundation of every university, there are no exclusive determinants as to what excellence means to people involved in higher education. When considering excellence, it is important to acknowledge that excellence is a fluid concept because maintaining or achieving it requires constant effort and adjustment as various goals are reached (Carlsen, 1982).

Although there is no consensus regarding the meaning of excellence, there are different elements on which an agreement may be reached. The main purpose of this study is to identify the criteria that define excellence in postsecondary education in Puerto Rico. It also intends to define: criteria legislators, educators, governing boards and members of CHE use to define excellence in postsecondary education; the different criteria stated by these groups; differences in how excellence is perceived by the educators in public and private institutions; and how excellence criteria vary among the groups consulted.

This paper presents the results of the first phase of the project.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

During the last decade several states took the initiative to improve or achieve quality in their higher education systems. According to Mayhew et al. (1990), currently every institution claims excellence or quality as its primary goal, but the search for excellence should be a continuous and unifying effort, not a problem to be solved (Seymour, 1991). As stated by Navas (1984), the search for excellence is a priority criterion in order to give direction to every institution in the 21st century. Without a commitment to excellence, universities have no sense in practical and substantive terms.

A Definition of Excellence

Excellence or quality has been defined by different researchers and institutions according to their goals and perceptions. Lindsay and Newmann (1988), pointed out that excellence refers to the "caliber of a performance being superb or brilliant in some absolute sense or being outstanding or superior relative to others" (p. 13).

Astin (1985), believes that excellence has to be defined to reflect an institution's ability to significantly change or develop the talent of the students and faculty. In regard to students, excellence refers to changes attributable to the college experience in terms of intellectual capacities and skills, values, attitudes, interests, habits, mental health, and career outcomes. To faculty, excellence deals with improvement in teaching, research or scholarly skills, and productivity that results from working in that institution. This definition is known as the "value-added" approach of quality (Solmon, 1981). An institution must determine what students bring with them and must assess what students obtain from college in order to measure the impact of the institution in the student body (In Pursuit of Degrees with Integrity, Northeast Missouri State University, 1984).

Other educational researchers believe that the concept of excellence in corporate America should be used to define excellence in the higher education system. That definition states that excellence should begin from the design

stage, go through the market stage, and be tied together to profitability, consumer satisfaction, strategic planning, and effective costs (Saymour, 1991).

Approaches to Excellence

Traditionally, American higher education systems looked to quantitative criteria as indicators of quality. Unfortunately, those indicators say little about what is happening in the educational process (Bergquist and Armstrong, 1986).

Alexander Astin, in Achieving Educational Excellence (1985), pinpoints that colleges and universities have been classified as "excellent" on the basis of four variables or traditional conceptions: reputation, resource allocation, content, and outcomes. According to the reputation conception, excellence is based on what people think constitutes the best or most excellent institution. This view usually arises from surveys in which different constituencies are asked to rank institutions. From this perspective, elite universities will always be ranked as excellent institutions.

The resource allocation view deals with the amount of quality which personnel, students, physical plant, and financial resources furnish. The quality of its faculty is assessed by the proportion of doctorates, research and publication rates, and awards received, among others. Student quality is measured in terms of students' high performance on standardized tests, outstanding high school records, and others. Physical plant is evaluated in terms of the number and quality of classrooms, library resources and facilities, laboratories, residential facilities, and so on. Fiscal resources are assessed by large endowments, per student expenditures, student-faculty ratios, average class size, high faculty salary, healthy research funds, and so forth. From the resources point of view, the bigger the better.

Excellence as content refers to what an institution teaches. An institution rated as excellent has a strong component in liberal arts, especially within science programs, having as its only exception the technologically oriented universities which award degrees in engineering.

The outcomes conception measures excellence in terms of the quality of its product. That is, institutions are rated excellent by the proportion of its alumni who get graduate fellowships or who pursue and obtain doctorates, alumni high lifetime earnings, alumni rating of their undergraduate experience, employment of graduates, low attrition rates, and others. In other words, excellence is measured in terms of proxy measurements (Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 1990).

Astin (1985) indicates that, unfortunately, these traditional ways of defining and measuring institutional excellence are not necessarily effective in developing the talent of both students and faculty. Achieving high quality in the educational process requires that serious attention be given to what is actually being done to promote or inhibit the cognitive and affective development of each student and the professional growth of the faculty (Bergquist and Armstrong, 1986).

Skinner and Tofel (1986) point out that the traditional approaches to excellence have their own merit, but are limited because they do not reflect the total quality of a given program. Each of these approaches contributes to the achievement of excellence in different stages of the process. An institution that wants to achieve excellence should take advantage of each one of these approaches. They should work towards the goal of promoting the talent of students and faculty. For instance, an institution with lavish library resources not used by students and faculty is not promoting the development of talent. Similarly, if the faculty is not committed to the teaching-learning process, little contribution to excellence should be expected.

How is Quality Measured?

No absolute indicator or measurement of quality is possible because its meaning varies with the contituencies's history, current needs, goals and perceptions (Tan, 1986; Seymour, 1991). Solmon (1981), indicates that the assessment of quality "must take into account institutional or departmental goals, evaluate the desirability of these goals from a variety of perspectives, and determine the extent to which those goals are achieved" (p. 10).

There are attributes of quality upon which both educators and public agree. Tan (1986) indicates that it is extremely important for institutions that are attempting to enhance or reach quality to know at least some attributes beforehand.

In 1984, Gilley et. al. (1986) began the search for examples of institutions of higher education that were moving toward new levels of excellence. They asked 30 prominent higher educators to nominate schools that were moving toward excellence. Twenty four educators nominated 112 institutions from all over the nation. After additional screenings, twenty institutions were selected to be studied in depth. The result of the study showed ten common characteristics among them: 1) a mission, well known to the community, which states the institution's direction and its anticipated future; 2) the presence and recognition of leadership from the president; 3) dynamically supportive boards; 4) significant emphasis on teamwork and the creation of strong administrative teams with high spirit of collaboration; 5) deep concern to community needs and their support; 6) an atmosphere that promotes individual initiatives and recognition; 7) commitment to the institution; 8) an intense concern for the quality of the education provided to students and the experience gathered by the faculty; 9) the capacity to be responsive to external opportunities; and 10) the focus on quality or excellence in their present and future programs.

A search of the literature reveals some indicators of quality or excellence in terms of the following components: students, academic programs (curriculum and faculty), and institutional environment (educational resources, support services, administration, physical facilities and fiscal resources).

Indicators of Quality or Excellence in Terms of Students

Traditionally, student quality has been measured in terms of skills and knowledge when entering the higher education system. Outstanding high school indexes, above average scores in the SAT, and students' talents and personal attributes have been the basic indicators of what to expect from them. Usually, institutions claim they are excellent when they enroll highly talented students. According to the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, an excellent

institution is one that considers potential, motivation and will to learn when selecting the students.

Until the 80's, researchers had paid little attention on measuring the impact of college experiences on students. However, as Mingle (1986) indicates, institutions have to measure how much value they are adding to enrolled students. The "value-added" is the true measure of the graduates' personal and professional competencies acquired as a result of his/her years in the university or college. Skinner and Tofel (1986) point out that high ranking performance examinations, outstanding written works, and active participation in students professional organizations, are some of the indicators of quality in students. The "value-added" approach allows an institution to establish criteria of quality concerning students.

Student satisfaction should be used as an indicator of institutional excellence coupled with the enhancement of their cognitive and affective development (Astin, 1985).

Quality or Excellence Indicators in Academic Programs

Researchers (Skinner and Tofel,1986; and Bergquist and Armstrong, 1986) point out that programs judged to be of high quality show common characteristics: 1) purposes and objectives related to the needs and interests of their current and potential students; 2) match between students' characteristics and the resources essential for their success; 3) faculty who pay attention to their role in undergraduate teaching, curriculum development and implementation, and student-teacher relationship; 4) acknowledgement of faculty, students, staff and even the surrounding community; 5) undergraduate student involvement in scholarly activities; 6) systematic internal program reviews; 7) a consideration of the history, mission, purpose, style, resources, and the future in the design of the program; 8) intended learning outcomes clearly defined and the achievement of them fully documented and communicated; and 9) the provision of opportunities is presented to assess each learners' knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, behaviors, and needs in order to permit him/her to grow and develop in satisfying ways.

Besides these characteristics, a high quality program must show congruence among the curriculum that is described in the catalogue, the curriculum taught by the faculty, and the curriculum that is learned by students (Cross, 1975 as quoted by Bergquist and Armstrong, 1986). A high quality academic program also is linked to other programs at the institution and enables others to exhibit the same characteristics. According to Mahew et. al. (1990), a quality undergraduate program will prepare students to use words, numbers and abstract concepts and to understand, cope with, and influence the environment in which they live.

Quality or Excellence Indicators in Terms of Faculty

There is a lack of agreement on how faculty quality or excellence can be measured. During the 60's and 70's, faculty research productivity was one of the most used variables to measure quality (Tan, 1986). The higher the number of research, publications, and scholarly contributions, the better the quality.

Sherman et. al. (1987) identified five characteristics that describe excellent teachers or college instructors: enthusiasm, clarity, preparation and organization, stimulating, and knowledgeable. Enthusiasm refers to faculty's attitude and interest towards the subject matter they teach. Clarity deals with the ability to clearly explain concepts. Preparation and organization describes the structured activities professors perform before delivering the lesson. Stimulating refers to the development of students' critical thinking skills, interest, and thoughtfulness in the subject matter. Knowledgeable refers to the deep understanding and love for the subject they teach. Besides these characteristics, they found out that the progressive development of teaching skills is very important to be an excellent teacher. Furthermore, it has been found that a quality faculty will utilize teaching techniques that respond to student learning styles and developmental levels (Lindquist, 1981).

Quality Indicators in Terms of Institutional Environment

Few studies have been conducted to measure quality in terms of institutional and human resources and less more evidence exists of the linkage among them (Tan, 1986). It is a popular believe that an institution with massive resources is an excellent institution. According to Astin (1985), the contribution to quality

of the resources available in an institution must be measured in terms of how those resources are used to enhance the cognitive and affective development of students and faculty.

In regard to resources, the MSA (1990) pinpoints some indicators of quality in an institution: 1) services adequate to the student's development and degree level; 2) counseling services suitable to the needs and aspirations of students; 3) physical facilities suitable to the institutions programs and functions; 4) library and learning resources consistent with the mission and goals of the institution and according to the diversity of its curriculum and degree offerings; and 5) adequate, updated and well maintained equipment.

No clear evidence of the relationship between fiscal resources and quality has been established, but the MSA (1990), stressed the need of institutional financial stability in order to maintain and assure the quality of instruction and services. The economic resources of each institution should match the institution's goals and academic programs.

In regard to the characteristics of the administrative staff, the MSA (1990) states that the staff must have "clear definitions of administrative and academic responsibilities, within a secure framework of academic freedom" (p. 5).

Researchers perceive that the president of a college or university must be a leader; a leader who has a sense of service and who is able to articulate and foster a clear view of the mission and goals of the organization (Astin, 1985; Kauffman, 1981). "The president must have the capacity to communicate with the campus, to explain the circumstances and the options, to listen to the choices others propose before making a decision" (Nason, 1981 p. 45). He/she should also have strong support from the board of trustees, as their support is a must. They must show faculty, students, alumni, and public alike, that they are concerned, informed, and responsible for the well being and survival of the institution (Nason, 1981).

External Environment

No studies were found that relate the external environment with quality in higher education. However, it is a well known fact that an excellent academic

program is one that considers the current and future needs of the surrounding society, and that articulates its curriculum to emergent technology and new knowledge. It seems that the quality of learning provided to students depends, to some extent, on the elements surrounding the educational enterprise.

In Search for Excellence in the Puerto Rico Higher Education System

At the end of the 80's, administrators and educators in the Puerto Rico higher education systems called for the need to foster excellence in their academic enterprise. Academic excellence should be the main commitment for the 90's in order to strengthen the quality and the possibilities of an institution to survive in the next century. The Commission for Educational Reform of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico (1990) perceives that excellence can be achieved through the talent development model. The Commission emphasized that these achievements will require the revision and continuous actualization of the curriculum. These revisions should respond to students' individual needs as well as community concerns and developments.

In the search for excellence, two of the major private universities in the island have reviewed their mission and goals, their curriculum, their budget and even their tuition fees. However, the perception of excellence seems to be determined by the accreditation process, specifically by the accreditation given by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. This perception of excellence will continue until local indicators of excellence are developed by the institutions.

In 1988, a study of higher education conducted by Rivera et al. revealed that both faculty and employers were unsatisfied with the quality of the graduates from the five main institutions of higher education in the island. The study also found that graduates lack mathematical and critical thinking skills, communication skills in both English and Spanish, positive attitudes towards work, and adequate management of time. The same study found that most graduates were satisfied with their college experience, but that they also realized their college education did not develop their optimum potential for skilled work.

Graduates reported the need for more practical training in their professional field.

SCENARIO - THE PUERTO RICO HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Puerto Rico Higher Education System comprises 41 accredited higher education institutions of which 7 are public. As mentioned before, the five principal institutions are the University of Puerto Rico, Inter American University, the Ana G. Méndez Educational Foundation, Catholic University, and the University of the Sacred Heart. These five universities served 84 percent of the total enrollment in the 41 higher education institutions for the year 1989-90.

Higher Education has experienced an accelerated growth in the last fifteen years, due in part to the economic federal aid the Island has received in the form of scholarships (Pell Grants). During the 1989-90, the total fall enrollment in accredited institutions of higher learning in Puerto Rico was 156,147, with 58,940 registered in the public system, and 97,207 in the private institutions. The University of Puerto Rico serves 55,626, or 94.7 percent, of the students registered in public institutions. The Inter American University, the Sacred Heart University, the Catholic University and the Ana G. Méndez Educational Foundation serve 76,082, or 78 percent, of the students registered in private institutions. Inter American University serves 40 percent of the private sector enrollment.

Irizarry (1990), states that "Puerto Rico occupies the fifth place in the world in postsecondary enrollment rate. In 1976, the coefficient of university enrollment in relation to the 18-24 years old population was 28.0 percent; in 1982-83 it increased to 32 percent."

In Puerto Rico, trends in enrollment rate in state and private universities are not the same as in the United States, where data indicates that people with higher income attend private institutions while low income people attend public institutions. In the island, generally speaking, people with higher incomes attend public institutions while low income people attend the private ones.

METHODOLOGY

Population

The original population for the study was comprised by legislators, administrators of five higher education institutions, and people in their governing boards. Of the five higher education institutions, four were private and the other was the state university.

Another category was later added to the original population considered for the research: that of prominent figures of the academia. The selection criteria was their commitment with, and their accomplishments in, public and private higher education. Also considered was their participation as consultants to the legislature and the Puerto Rico Department of Education.

Sample Composition

The total sample consisted of 181 subjects. The legislators category included 25 members. The administrators category comprised presidents, chancellors, and dean-directors totalling 27 subjects, and students, academic, and administrative affairs deans with 36. The governing board category included 88 subjects. The prominent personalities category consisted of 5 subjects. After two mailings, the overall response rate was 41.4 percent.

Procedure

A Delphi methodology was used to collect the data. The Delphi technique was originally developed by the Rand Corporation (Helmer, 1967, as cited by Orlich, date not known). Although not a scientific technique, it is considered a systematic method.

Basically, the respondents participate in three or more rounds of surveying. "The Delphi technique is justified primarily on the rationale that it allows for professional judgments to be made, avoids personality conflicts and interpersonal politics, and reduces the impact of status, or persons in high position, from forcing judgments in group discussions in the direction which they deem desirable" (Orlich, date not known, p. 108). With this technique, the opinions of the surveyed group can be organized and prioritized. The multiple exposure to

the issues being evaluated facilitates the respondents to better identify the most relevant criteria.

On this part of the research only the first step of the Delphi methodology was used: the design and distribution of a questionnaire containing the issues for evaluation. The questionnaire was mailed to the selected sample. A second mailing was made to increase the responding rate. Given the importance of legislators and prominent figures of the academia in policy making, and their low original responding rate, it was necessary to conduct personal interviews to obtain their opinion.

The second stage of the research is being developed. In this phase, the participants will rate the list of selected criteria obtained from the initial ranking.

Instrument Description

An open ended questionnaire was used to collect the data. The questionnaire "Excellence in Post Secondary Education in Puerto Rico" consists of four sections inherent to the different areas of university life, as established by the Middle States Association in the manual Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Students, Academic Programs, Institutional Environment and External Environment. Respondents were asked to list at least five criteria in each of the four categories: students, academic programs, institutional and external environment. It also includes a section asking general information of those surveyed. An additional section was provided for those respondents who wished to express additional concerns of areas not considered in the questionnaire and which they considered were of great importance in the establishment of quality criteria.

In order to validate the questionnaire, it was submitted to five experts in the field of higher education and/or research methodology. The final version of the instrument included the recommendations of these experts.

Statistical Analysis

The analysis on this first part of the study was conducted using descriptive statistics. It includes frequency distribution and percentage. Comparisons were

made between public and private institutions, and among the different categories of the sample.

FINDINGS

Participants were asked to mention criteria that define excellence in selected areas of higher education: Students, Academic Programs, Institutional and External Environment. The results follow:

Students

Entering characteristics

Respondents mentioned 56 criteria that can be rearranged into eight major areas of concern: academic potential and achievement, mastery of basic skills, attitude, study habits, clear goals and commitment to attain them, motivation, desire of self-improvement, and personality traits.

The most mentioned criteria were those related to academic potential and achievement in high school. Most of the respondents specifically pointed out the general point average (57.3%) as an important indicator of the quality of the students that enter an university. Mentioned secondly as an important area of concern was the mastering of basic skills (49.3%).

Thirty seven percent of the respondents mentioned the results of the College Entrance Examination (the equivalent to SAT), as an important criteria to be considered in establishing quality of incoming students. The fourth most mentioned criteria was motivation and desire of self-improvement (32.0%). The mastering of English was another skill stressed by respondents (30.7%). Other criteria mentioned as important were personality traits such as leadership, responsibility, maturity, and sociability.

A separate analysis was done where the responses of each group were used as the independent variable. The criteria most frequently mentioned by university administrators was the general point average (51.9%). The administrators of public institutions mentioned it more frequently (73.3%) than administrators of private institutions (25.0%). A second criteria mentioned by administrators was communication skills (48.2%). As opposed to the former one, this criteria was mentioned more by administrators of the private institutions (66.7%).

Legislators mentioned communication skills (81.8%) more frequently than any other criteria, specifically reading and writing skills, and the mastering of English (63.3%). They also mentioned study habits (54.5%) and general point average (54.5%) as important.

Governing board members mentioned the general point average (71.9%) more frequently, but mentioned the College Entrance Examination (65.6%) as also important. As a third criteria, they mentioned communication skills (37.5%).

It was the respondents in the prominent figures group who most frequently mentioned motivation as a criteria of excellence (100%). They consider critical thinking skills (60.0%), study habits (60.0%), and responsibility (60.0%) also as important criteria.

Development during university life

As in the previous item, a great dispersion was observed in the responses. The most frequently mentioned criteria were the correct language usage (36.0%), and the integration of a general culture within themselves (32.0%). Also mentioned were the involvement in extra curricular activities (28.0%) - considered to be an indicator of leadership, and the ability to apply mathematical principles (25.3%). Other criteria mentioned were the development of critical thinking skills (21.3%), the understanding of religious principles (21.3%), and the development of an adequate balance in the appreciation of arts and sciences (21.3%).

Governing boards members of the private institutions were most likely to emphasize the importance of religious principles (50.0%), possibly due to the fact that three of the four private institutions surveyed are ruled by religious principles. Notwithstanding, it should be stressed that, even though they are ruled by religious principles, they do not use religion as a criteria in the selection of their students.

For university administrators the two most mentioned criteria were the development of critical thinking skills (51.9%) and the involvement in extracurricular activities (51.9%). Administrators of public institutions mentioned correct language usage and academic achievement (40.0%) as relevant

indicators of excellence in the institution. Legislators as a group mentioned four criteria as important when evaluating the development of students: involvement in extra curricular activities (36.4%), development of personal discernment (36.4%) - defined by them as the ability to accept different opinions without giving up one's principles, commitment to their institutions (36.4%), and learning to learn (36.4%).

The last group, prominent figures, mentioned two new criteria as equally important: participation in research (60.0%) and an ample or interdisciplinary vision of knowledge (60.0%).

It is important to stress that when stating criteria that define excellence during the developmental years, the general point average, critical thinking, and an ample or interdisciplinary vision of knowledge were consistently mentioned.

Outcomes at graduation time

A great dispersion was observed again when evaluating responses to the item on criteria that define excellence at graduation time, as 66 criteria were mentioned. Mostly mentioned were: adequacy for employment (45.3%), graduation general point average (41.3%),commitment with the improvement of society and ample or interdisciplinary vision of knowledge (30.7% respectively), satisfaction with attainments (29.3%), knowledge of history and culture and their role in human enhancement (25.3%), religious and ethical principles (25.3%), and acquisition of critical thinking skills (24.0%).

In this part of the analysis it is observed that university administrators were more likely to mention adequacy for employment (40.7%) as an important criteria to assess excellence in higher education at graduation time, although they also mentioned academic achievement (37.0%) and critical thinking skills (22.0%). Strong differences were observed in the responses of administrators of public and private institutions in regard to importance of academic achievement: 53.3 percent of respondents of public institutions and 16.7 percent of respondents of private ones mentioned this criteria.

The criteria most frequently mentioned by legislators were learning to learn (54.5%), mastering of major and other disciplines (45.5%), commitment to the

betterment of society (36.4%), critical thinking skills (27.3%), and technological skills (27.3%).

Respondents of the governing boards' group mostly mentioned adequacy for employment (71.9%), but also mentioned academic achievement (65.6%). Most of them (59.4%) coincided in mentioning four other criteria: knowledge of history and culture and their role in human enhancement, commitment to the betterment of society, religious and ethical principles, and an ample or interdisciplinary vision of knowledge.

The whole group of prominent figures coincided in mentioning the mastering of technological skills as an indicator of quality in graduates (100%). Other criteria mentioned by them were mastering of major and other disciplines (80.0%), and learning to learn (40.0%).

Academic Programs

Characteristics

Higher Education institutions are generally known for their academic programs, especially when programs are unique.

Respondents mentioned 53 criteria that deal with aspects of pertinence; relation to institutional philosophy and mission; goals and objectives; general academic aspects; resources; and specific characteristics such as originality, amplitude, and creativity.

The criteria mentioned more frequently was pertinence (56.0%), especially in relation to the employment market, but also in relation to social needs (26.7%). A considerable group of respondents coincided in mentioning a balance between the general education program and the major courses (what they call balanced education, 38.7 percent). Other criteria mentioned were requirement of practical experience in their field of study (34.7%) and comprehensiveness (34.7%).

The administrators mentioned pertinence (63.0%) more frequently than any other criteria. Respondents in the governing boards group mentioned comprehensiveness (65.6%), but also mentioned practical experience (65.6%), pertinence to the employment market (59.4%), promote a balanced education

(59.4%), and directed toward an adequate employment or graduate studies (59.4%). Prominent figures coincided with administrators in mentioning pertinence to the employment market more frequently (80.0%) than any other criteria, but also mentioned the inter and multidisciplinarity of programs (60.0%), and to promote a balanced education (60%).

Curriculum/Content

Curriculum is considered fundamental when defining excellence in higher education. When asked to mention criteria that would define excellence in regard to curriculum/content, respondents mentioned twenty different ones as important. The criteria most frequently mentioned were pertinence (54.7%), comprehensiveness (53.3%), and flexibility (42.7%). Other criteria mentioned were interdisciplinarity (30.7%), incorporation of the use of technology (25.3%), promote critical thinking (24.0%), emphasize general education and basic skills (21.37%), and promote the development of skills in major discipline (20.0%).

When analyzing the frequency with which groups of respondents mentioned the different criteria, it was found that administrators of both public and private institutions coincided in the frequency of mentioning pertinence, and to promote critical thinking skills (51.9% in each case). Legislators also mentioned pertinence more frequently (63.6%) than any other criteria, but secondly mentioned the promoting of the development of skills in the major discipline (45.5%). Criteria most frequently mentioned by members of governing boards were comprehensiveness (65.6%) and flexibility (59.4%), but also mentioned that the curriculum should emphasize a general education (50.0%). Prominent figures most frequently mentioned interdisciplinarity of the curriculum (100.0%) and pertinence (100.0%) as relevant criteria of excellence, but also mentioned comprehensiveness (80.0%) and the promoting of the development of skills in the major discipline (80.0%).

Faculty (Characteristics/Experience)

An area considered relevant when establishing criteria of excellence in higher education is faculty. In regard to faculty, the first and most frequently mentioned criteria of excellence is academic preparation specifically to have a

doctorate degree (64.0%). The second most frequently mentioned criteria was the necessity to be updated in his/her discipline (38.7%), and teaching experience (33.3%). Other criteria mentioned were the use of adequate instructional techniques (32.0%), commitment to research (20.0%), commitment to students (17.3%), commitment to the teaching-learning process (16.0%), and adequate communication skills (13.7%).

Within the group of administrators, criteria mentioned more frequently were the necessity to be updated in his/her discipline (63.0%), adequate academic preparation (51.9%), and the use of instructional techniques (48.2%). Administrators of public institutions mentioned the necessity to be updated more frequently (93.3%) than those of private ones (25.0%), while the latter mentioned more frequently academic preparation (66.7%).

Legislators mentioned the use of adequate instructional techniques (81.8%) more frequently than any other criteria, even though they also mentioned adequate academic preparation (54.6%), and expertise (54.6%).

Respondents in the group of members in the governing boards mentioned academic preparation (87.5%) more frequently than any other criteria, but experience was also frequently mentioned (59.4%).

The criteria most frequently mentioned by prominent figures were to be updated in his/her discipline (80.0%) and commitment to the teaching-learning process (80.0%).

It can be said, in general terms, that for administrators as well as for prominent figures the characteristics that define excellence in faculty are mainly academic.

Institutional Environment

Instructional Resources

Sufficient and adequate library resources was the most frequently mentioned criteria (81.3%) in this item, principally by administrators of private institutions. Also frequently mentioned was the incorporation of modern technology in the teaching and administrative processes (76.0%).

Support services

Three criteria were the most frequently mentioned in this item: optimal medical services (82.7%), a solid counseling and guidance program (78.7%), and adequate services rendered by the Registrar's Office (68.0%). Also mentioned were the availability of cafeterias, athletic facilities, and a placement office, as well as computer centers, a theater, and parking facilities.

Administrators: characteristics/experience

Respondents mentioned ten different criteria. The three most frequently mentioned were adequate vision and perspective of the future of higher education (85.3%), capacity to interact with others (78.7%), and congruence between academic background and administrative functions (72.0%). Other criteria mentioned were professional competence (60.0%), academic preparation (45.3%), dedication (36.0%), ability to establish a good relationship with the external community (32.0%), commitment to the achievement of excellence (30.7%), honesty (29.3%), and leadership (25.3%).

Administrators of public institutions (100.0%) and prominent figures (80.0%) were most likely to mention adequate vision and perspective of the future of higher education, but they also mentioned the capacity to interact with others (prominent figures - 100.0% and administrators of public institutions - 93.3%). Congruence between academic background and administrative functions was the criteria most frequently mentioned by members of the governing boards. (93.8%)

Physical Facilities

When stating criteria of excellence in regard to physical facilities, respondents mostly used words such as adequate (84.0%), ample (72.0%) and clean (66.7%). Respondents of the governing boards (90.6%) and of the administrators of private institutions (91.7%) groups mentioned mostly that physical facilities should be modern in terms of equipment and technology.

Fiscal Resources

People surveyed mostly mentioned five criteria as important when defining excellence in regard to fiscal resources within the institutional environment: sufficient to meet the financial needs of the programs offered (68.7%),

sufficient to meet institutional growth (64.0%), obtained from different sources (58.7%), enough to make the institution self-sufficient (54.7%), and principally allocated to academic areas (49.3%). Congruence was observed in the responses of all groups

External Environment

Strategic planning concedes great importance to the analysis and incorporation of environmental variables in higher education offerings. Most of the subjects surveyed indicated the institution's identification or commitment toward its external environment as an excellence criteria (57.3%). Mentioned secondly were the interaction with private business and other special relations (54.7%). Two additional criteria were institution's receptiveness to change, and the institutions attention to environment when considering the planning of programs, activities and services (32.0% and 29.3%, respectively).

It is necessary to mention that this item was not answered by all of the respondents and that those who responded only mentioned one or two criteria. Although strong differences were not observed between the sample, it can be said that the administrators mostly mentioned the interaction with private business (59.3%). Considering the administrator's type of institution, it was observed that public administrators pointed this criteria more frequently (73.3%), while private administrators underlined the identification or commitment to the community as a criteria to be considered (75.0%).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The findings of this study show a combination of approaches in the responses. Some of them show traditional approaches, while others sustain the value-added approach. Under the traditional perspective, a strong emphasis on resource allocation and content conception was found.

In general, when refering to students characteristics, the most frequently mentioned criteria are related to academic achievement as determined by general point average, a traditional perception of excellence criteria. It was also underlined that institutions must develop a general culture knowledge and prepare students for employment, evidence of the value-added approach.

When considering entering characteristics, administrators (specially public ones) and governing boards, underline academic general average. Legislators stressed communication skills, while prominent figures stressed students' motivation.

In regard to student developmental years, the governing boards of the private institutions emphasized the development of religious principles, administrators emphasized the critical thinking skills, and prominent figures emphasized research and interdisciplinarity. Legislators did not mention specific criteria.

In considering student outcomes, strong differences were observed between public and private administrators. While the former stressed the importance of academic achievement, the latter emphasized adequacy for employment, as did members of the governing boards. Legislators considered learning to learn as the most important criteria of excellence and prominent figures the mastery of technological skills.

In regard to characteristics and curriculum in academic programs respondents frequently mentioned pertinence, especially in relation to the employment market. However, members of the governing boards stressed program comprehensiveness as a criteria of excellence. These criteria have been consistently mentioned in the literature.

Respondents indicated that in order to attain excellence, that institutions' faculty must have an adequate academic preparation, doctorate degree preferred, a traditional conception of excellence. Administrators and prominent figures stressed the need of an updated faculty. Legislators underlined the use of adequate instructional techniques, while members of governing boards emphasized academic preparation.

Although the academic preparation of faculty was strongly emphasized, which is a traditional view of excellence, respondents indicated that the active involvement of faculty in undergraduate teaching, and knowledge of teaching techniques were also essential criteria. The latter is congruent with the study conducted by Sherman et. al. in 1987 and Lindquist, 1981.

In regard to institutional environment, respondents mentioned characteristics such as sufficiency and adequacy as indicators of excellence. The authors think that when respondents mentioned sufficiency they were using a traditional approach. However, when they say adequacy they are dealing with the value-added approach in which a match between the students' interests and needs and the available resources is essential to promote their success.

Respondents considered that the criteria that best define excellence in higher education, when considering external environment, is the institution's commitment toward it. No strong differences were found between sample components.

Responses seem to represent the current tendency in higher education to incorporate the strategic planning approach in their processes. Respondents' answers seem to agree with the basic principles stated by the MSA in their book Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education.

The second phase of this study is currently being developed and is expected to be finished by the end of the fall semester.

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